

Ofcom Foreword

The Foreign Interference Offence, as set out in the National Security Act (2023), seeks to make forms of state-linked interference in the UK more difficult. The offence has also been included in the Online Safety Bill as a priority offence, requiring services to assess the risk of this activity taking place on their service and put in place proportionate measures to effectively mitigate and manage the risks from it.

Once the Online Safety Bill becomes law, Ofcom will become the regulator for online safety in the UK. Under the legislation, we are required to establish the Advisory Committee on Disinformation and Misinformation which will advise us about how providers should deal with disinformation and misinformation, and about the exercise of Ofcom's new transparency and media literacy powers in relation to such content.

We also have statutory duties to promote and carry out research into media literacy under the Communications Act 2003. A primary way we seek to fulfil our existing duties is through our *Making Sense of Media* programme, which aims to help improve the online skills, knowledge and understanding of children and adults in the UK. Once the Online Safety Bill becomes law, we expect Ofcom's statutory duties will include references to helping the public understand the nature and impact of disinformation and misinformation as part of our media literacy role.

As a part of our preparatory work, we have been carrying out research to build an evidence base and our understanding in relation to offences and our responsibilities included in the Online Safety Bill. While there is some research into how forms of manipulation or interference have taken place via user-to-user services, there is limited evidence on how this could occur via online search services. We therefore commissioned the Alliance for Securing Democracy to carry out research aimed at understanding how these risks could manifest. They have sought to understand the extent to which foreign state-linked websites appear in search results relating to topics of national importance to UK citizens. Their study provides illustrative case studies exploring how UK users can come across the presence of foreign state-backed media in search returns on different search services.

The report helps to inform our media literacy role by extending and enriching our understanding of the types of environments users could encounter risks of foreign interference activities. This is important to understand when considering media literacy initiatives designed to help UK consumers use a range of critical thinking skills which, when aligned with appropriate knowledge and behaviour, support them in evaluating online content.

Though the report offers several illustrative examples highlighting findings uncovered by the research, the bulk of this report is focused on assessing a potential risk of foreign interference by identifying types of variables that regularly generated search results linked to foreign states. The report does not attempt to determine whether content is potentially illegal under the Foreign Interference Offence and should not be considered a reflection of any policy position that Ofcom may adopt when we take up our role as the online safety regulator.